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# THE CHEVALIER DE SAINT-GEORGE

## VIOLINIST

By LIONEL DE LA LAURENCIE

**T**HIS strange and romantic personage, one who seems made to tempt the pen of a Lenôtre, was born at Basse-Terre (Guadalupe), December 25, 1745, the son of a comptroller-general, M. de Boulogne, and a negress. He was given the Christian name of Joseph Boulogne Saint-George. Is this the origin of the surname "Saint-George" under which he became famous? No historical document exists which might authenticate the fact; but M. Roger de Beauvoir, who has written a lengthy novel<sup>1</sup> with Saint-George for its hero, one filled with detail which is not altogether inaccurate, furnishes a quite reasonable explanation of the origin of the name. "This name, Saint-George," he writes, "was not given the young mulatto as a mere matter of choice of name, as is so often the case in the colonies. The handsomest vessel in the harbor of Guadalupe, at the time the child was born, served him in the stead of a godfather."

Brought to France by his father when he was very young, Saint-George soon gave proof of the extraordinary ease with which he learned. Placed in lodgings with the famous fencing-master La Boëssière, he rapidly became a redoubtable fencer, and showed remarkable endowment for all forms of bodily exercise. The little mulatto's petulance, says Angelo, and his extraordinary vivacity greatly entertained M. de Boulogne, who said that instead of a man he had engendered a sparrow.<sup>2</sup>

Before long La Boëssière's pupil had acquired great superiority, not alone in the handling of the foils, but as a marksman, skater, equestrian and dancer as well. At the same time his rare natural gifts for the arts, and notably for music, were carefully cultivated. Saint-George took lessons from Jean-Marie Leclair, and his talent for the violin soon made itself evident. In 1761 he was numbered among the *gendarmes* of the royal guard; yet his leisure hours made it possible for him to perfect, without interruption, his

<sup>1</sup>Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges. Roger de Beauvoir. Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1890. The book is well-written, and interesting despite the occasional obtrusion of the melodramatic. It gives vivid pictures of life in the French Antilles and Paris during the closing decades of the *ancien régime*.—*Transl.*

<sup>2</sup>Henry Angelo: *Angelo's Pic-Nic*, 1905, p. 10.



The Chevalier de Saint-George

cultivation of the arts. And in 1786 Moline had inscribed, below the portrait of Saint-George, the following lines which do homage at one and the same time to the accomplished dancer and the fervent disciple of Euterpe:

Enfant du Goût et du Génie,  
Il naquit au sacré Vallon,  
Et fut de Terpsichore émule et nourrisson  
Rival du Dieu de l'Harmonie,  
S'il eût à la musique uni la poésie,  
On l'aurait pris pour Apollon.<sup>1</sup>

(Offspring of taste and genius, he  
Was one the sacred valley bore,  
Of Terpsichore nursling and competitor;  
A d'ed rival of the god of harmony.  
Had he to music added poesy,  
Apollo's self he'd been mistaken for.)

We may recall the fact that Tartini, too, was something of a fencer; his predilection for the rapier gives him a certain kinship with Saint-George, who thus appears to be the second violinist who cultivated the art of fence.

Established as a man of the world, Saint-George never moved about without a following of admirers. In 1766, he pitted himself against the celebrated Italian fencer Faldoni (in September); and at the same time that he was studying composition with Gossec (who, in 1766, inscribed to him his Op. IX, Six trios for two violins and bass), he led a gay, worldly life. His father had left him an income of from 7,000 to 8,000 *livres*, but the fashionable mulatto spent without count, and thrust himself feverishly into the Parisian social whirlpool, awaking in women a mixture of sympathetic curiosity and haughty reserve. Toward 1770, he devoted himself seriously to his musical studies and, during the winter of 1772-1773, he played at the *Concert des amateurs* two concertos for a principal violin with orchestra, whose merit is vaunted by the *Mercure*, announcing them in December, 1773. These concertos in course of time acquired a decided vogue. Yet they were only our violinist's compositorial first-fruits, since in June, 1773, the *Mercure* announced the issue by the music publisher Sieber, of six string quartets by Saint-George.

This establishes the fact that Gossec and Saint-George were the first French musicians who wrote string quartets. This type of composition which was largely cultivated in Paris after the

<sup>1</sup>*Mercure de France*, Feb. 1768, p. 18.

beginning of 1765, numbered among its representatives: Toeschi (1765), Cannabich (1766), Boccherini (1767), Talon and Misliwecek (1767), Haydn (1768), Leemans (1769), Gasman (1769), Regel (1769), Aspelmayer (1769), Vanhall (1770), Gossec (1770), Carlo Stamitz (1770), de Machi (1771), and J. Ch. Bach (1772).

Applauded as a virtuoso player and composer at the *Concert des Amateurs*, given at the Hotel Soubise, Saint-George lost no time in assuming the direction of the organization. In 1773, Gossec, the conductor, together with Gaviniés and Leduc, was asked to preside over the destinies of the *Concert spirituel*. In consequence he laid down the baton he had wielded at the Hotel Soubise, and his pupil inherited his charge. Two years later, in June, 1775, the publisher Bailleux brought out a whole series of concertos for violin by Saint-George, the opuses II, III, IV, and V. The gifted mulatto was then in the heydey of his creative activity, and by the end of the year 1775 he had already written a collection of *Symphonies concertantes*, one of which was played, on Christmas Day, at the *Concert Spirituel*.

His standing as a musician was now so firmly established that he was considered for the post of assistant director at the *Opéra*. Yet the candidacy of Saint-George met with a rather frigid reception on the part of the feminine contingent at the Royal Academy of Music. Grimm tells us how the singers and dancers, M<sup>es</sup> Arnould, Guimard and Rosalie at their head, presented a petition to the queen in order to represent that their honor, and the delicacy of their conscience, would never allow them to take orders from a mulatto.<sup>1</sup> They forgot the engaging Don Juan, and saw him only as a man of color.

The latter, nevertheless, if we are to credit Bachaumont, found few cruel ones among the fair. Most women, attracted by his many and marvelous gifts, sought him out, despite the homeliness of his features. "He loved" says the *Notice* which precedes La Boëssière's work, "and knew to make himself beloved." He was susceptible, a sentimentalist. On February 25, 1777, at the rehearsal of a symphony by the deceased Leduc, which was to be played the day following at the *Concert des Amateurs*, Saint-George, in the middle of the *adagio*, "moved by the expressive quality of the composition, and remembering that his friend was no more, dropped his bow and burst into tears; his emotion communicated itself to all the artists, and the rehearsal had to be adjourned."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires of Bachaumont*—Vol. XIV. May 1, 1779.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal de Paris*, March 17, 1777.

He was drawn to the theatre: in the month of July, 1777, he presented a comedy in three acts interspersed with *ariettes* and entitled *Ernestine*, at the *Comédie italienne*. Its wretched libretto was responsible for its failure, although the music was considered excellent. The *Mercure* admitted that the composer showed good qualities of style, and much knowledge, as well as "facility and talent." The score of *Ernestine* has not been preserved; only a few fragments of its music are extant in a collection of Saint-George's melodies, in the possession of the library of the Paris Conservatory. An air like that of *Ernestine*, the heroine, "*Clémengis, lis dans mon âme*," has an absolutely Gluckian aroma. Later, after having performed a second series of quartets, in 1778, he presented a new comedy with *ariettes* at the *Comédie italienne*, *La Chasse* (The Hunt), which drew good-sized audiences. Bachaumont mentions the vaudeville air with which the piece concludes and prophesies that it will soon become popular.

Favored by Mme. de Montesson, wife of the Duke of Orleans, Saint-George was attached to the latter's theatre and soon took charge of the concerts in which Mme. de Montesson played the parts of Mlle. Arnould and of Mlle. Laruelle. Mme. de Montesson even had an office assigned him in the ducal hunting establishment: Angelo says that our musician was given the title of "Lieutenant of the Hunt of Pinci." Thus introduced in the artistic, social and political centres of the Palais-Royal, Saint-George became one of the intimates of the Duke of Orleans. Yet, not content to shine on the boards of his patroness's theatre, he also acted in comedy on the ultra-elegant stage which the Marquise de la Montalembert had installed in her home in the *rue de la Roquette, faubourg Saint Antoine*.<sup>1</sup>

The violinist fencer thus ran the gamut of the talents as a victor. In spite of the fact that the career of his preceding *comedies à ariettes* had been that of the shortest, Saint-George had been encouraged by the success scored by his melodies and romances. He continued to write for the stage, and in March, 1780, his *l'Amant anonyme* (The anonymous Lover), the complete manuscript score of which is in the library of the Paris Conservatory, was presented. In the second act we discover one of those dialogue duets which delighted the music-lover of that day.

On the death of the Duke of Orleans, in 1785, Saint-George lost his charge of "Lieutenant of the Hunt of Pinci," a loss

<sup>1</sup>H. Vial et G. Capon: *Le Journal d'un Bourgeois de Popincourt, avocat au Parlement*, 1903, p. 34.

which affected his purse to such a degree that he was obliged to develop new resources by the practice of his favorite art of the fence.

He went to London, where he engaged in a series of fencing bouts with the most famous English and foreign fencing-masters. It was there that on April 9, 1787, he crossed steel in a sensational match with that celebrated adventuress, the Chevalière d'Eon, in the presence of the Prince of Wales. In the course of the summer he returned to Paris, and once more devoted himself to composition. On August 18, 1787, inspired, it may be, by his bout with the modern Pallas, he presented at the *Comédie italienne*, a two-act piece, prose and ariettes, which he called *La Fille garçon* (The Girl Boy). On this occasion Grimm again adverted to the celebrated mulatto and the "highly distinguished manner" in which he played the violin. The music of *La Fille garçon* was received with great applause, if we may credit the *Journal de Paris*.<sup>1</sup> According to Gerber, Saint-George also had performed, in 1788, at the *Théâtre des Beaujolais*, that is to say the *Palais-Royal*, another comedy entitled *Le Marchand de marrons*.

Some time later our musician was obliged to return to London, toward the end of the year 1789, when he accompanied into exile the new Duke of Orleans, the future Philippe-Égalité; and where, on different occasions, he had the opportunity of proving himself an incomparable virtuoso of the foils. It has been said that the Duke of Orleans made use of him in the conduct of his political intrigues, an assertion which does not seem to lack correctness, if it be examined in the light of the adventure of which he was the hero at Tournai, in June, 1791, when he arrived in the said city to give a concert there. The commandant advised him not to show himself in public, owing to the antipathy with which the French refugees regarded his liberal sentiments.<sup>2</sup> Was Saint-George using music to cloak a so-called mission? We do not know. But the fact remains that the account given of his escapade at Tournoi by his comrade Louise Fusil, contains no hint of any political role played by the mulatto at the request of the Duke of Orleans. She writes that she had entered into an engagement with Saint-George and his faithful friend, the horn-player Lamothe, to give concerts at Lille, in 1791, and that when these concerts had concluded, the mulatto had pushed forward as far as Tournai, where the emigrate nobles had looked on him with disfavor.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Journal de Paris*, Aug. 19, 1787.

<sup>2</sup>*Moniteur universel*, No. 172, p. 708.

<sup>3</sup>*Souvenirs d'une actrice*, Vol. 1, pp. 144, 145.

On the other hand, the documentary evidence of the archives informs us that Saint-George was living in Lille in 1791, and that for two years he was a captain in the National Guard. Thus in the violinist-National Guard captain, the love for music was allied to solid patriotic sentiments.

These sentiments he was soon to affirm in a manner still more striking. Toward the end of 1792 he raised a body of light troops under the name of "Saint-George's Legion," recruited among men of color. This legion was already organized by September 15, 1792; the mulatto at its head with the rank of "Chief of Brigade."<sup>1</sup> It was also known as "The American Hussars," and in 1793 became the 13th regiment of *Chasseurs* (Riflemen).

After various peripaties "Saint-George's Legion" arrived at Lille on February 23, 1793, which it left to march into Belgium, taking a brilliant part in the operations then in progress there. But its Colonel was to experience that mania of suspicion which was a feature of the times. On May 2d, 1793, the Commissioner Dufrenne wrote: "Saint-George is a man who will bear watching." He was accused of having diverted a large amount of funds destined for the use of his regiment to the payment of his personal debts; of maintaining 30 horses in his stables; and of ostentating an insolent luxury.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these accusations he retained command of his corps for some time;<sup>3</sup> then the political agitation began anew, and on September 25, 1793, the Executive Committee dismissed him. In vain Saint-George objects, in vain he places in evidence the proofs of his civic virtues, "those republican sentiments innate in him." In vain he demands a hearing in order to be able to submit his justification. He is arrested and imprisoned; first at Houdainville, then at Clermont-sur-Oise, where he was kept for over a year. His successor Target having written him that his greatest desire was to remit to Saint-George the command from which he had been so unjustly deposed, the latter again took up his pen and addressed a new petition to the Committee of Public Safety. He called attention to the fact that he had been one of the first to make known the treason of Dumouriez; and he adjoined justificatory documents which testified to his perfect civicism.

<sup>1</sup>Archives historiques du Ministère de la Guerre. P. Descaves: *Historique du 13 Regt. de Chasseurs.*

<sup>2</sup>Archives historiques, do.

<sup>3</sup>That his skill as a fencer was still generally acknowledged at this time is proved by a reference of de Marbot's anent Augereau, at that time *colonel d'état-major*, as "a great duellist, very brave, and who had made Saint-Georges, the strongest blade in France, knuckle under." *Mem. du Général Bon de Marbot*, I, p. 19.—Trans.

The mayor and municipal officials of Lille state positively that the corps commanded by Saint-George numbered only good patriots in its ranks; they regret that the Republic should have thought it needful to deprive herself of the services of so fine a citizen; and the ex-colonel's comrades pay the liveliest tributes to his bravery and his qualities as a commander.

Saint-George's removal was assuredly nothing less than an arbitrary measure, as unjust as it was unjustified. Hence the Committee of Public Safety, obliged to yield to the evidence, reinstated him in command of "The American Hussars," on the 24th of Floreal, the year III.<sup>1</sup> But the unfortunate Saint-George was not yet at the end of his troubles. During his absence the 13th *Chasseurs* had been twice reorganized. Commanded in the beginning by Target, he was succeeded by a certain Bouquet, Target being carried on the roster as a supernumerary. Hence the restoration of Saint-George gave the regiment a third colonel! The supernumerary colonel Target was eliminated; but the rivalry between Bouquet and Saint-George persisted. Each of the two chiefs in command gave his own orders, with the result that absolute anarchy ensued. The regiment was divided into two clans, *Bouquetistes* and *Saint-Georgistes*. Finally, politics entered in, and in short, Saint-George was dismissed from his command a second time, on the 8th of Brumaire of the year IV. In spite of all his efforts he did not succeed in inducing the Committee of Public Safety to reconsider its decision. In vain, on the 7th of Floreal, of the year V, did he write to Rewbell, that he had "constantly shown his great attachment to the Revolution;" in vain he again demanded that justice be done him. This time his military career had come to a definite end.

He then resumed his errant mode of life and, according to Louise Fusil, went to Santo Domingo with his faithful Lamothe, narrowly escaping being hung there in the course of a revolt. Returning to Paris, he lived in a state bordering on indigence until an ulcer of the bladder carried him off on the 12th of June, 1799.

Thus disappeared one of the most curious and engaging figures of the dying eighteenth century. Saint-George was a remarkably gifted man, full of generosity and delicacy of feeling. Liberal and beneficent, he often deprived himself of the necessities of life in order to aid the unfortunate. His contemporaries use the expression "full and soft" to express his violinistic gifts, and, in truth, it really seems to qualify his manner, in which the dual

<sup>1</sup>Archives historiques, 24 floreal, au III.

trends of his temperament are united, in a mingling of vivacity, brilliancy and dreamy melancholy. Since November 28, 1912, a street in Basse Terre bears his name.

## II.

Saint-George left numerous compositions for violin which make it possible for us to appreciate the adaptability and the varied nature of his talent as a composer, while at the same time they testify to his notable gifts as a violinist. He is known to have written: Six Quartets for 2 violins, alto and bass, Op. I (1773); 10 Concertos for a principal violin, violins I and II, alto, bass, oboe, flutes, and 2 horns, *ad libitum*, comprising Op. II, III, IV, V, VII and VIII, which appeared from 1775 on; *Symphonies concertantes* for 2 principal violins, (s. d.); further Three Sonatas for the clavecin or fortepiano, with accompaniment of an obbligato violin (1781); and finally, a posthumous work, preserved in the British Museum, consisting of Three Sonatas for violin, Bk. I (toward 1801). We will consider here: 1) the quartets; 2) the concertos and symphonies concertantes; 3) the sonatas.

1. The six quartets for string instruments by Saint-George known to us are cast with regularity in the mold of the *Allegro-Rondo* which the majority of contemporary eighteenth century composers utilized. Though three of the *Quartetti concertanti* by J. Chr. Bach, published by Sieber, end with a minuet, two of them have a *rondo* for the concluding movement. One even sees minuets, as in the case of Schwindl, for instance (Op. VII), qualified by the indication: *Tempo di rondo*.

As to the form composed of two movements, it occurs in numerous examples about the year 1770. We need but look at the *Divertimenti* by Boccherini (Op. X, 1773), each of which comprises no more than two movements. And even the quartets of J. Chr. Bach conform to the identical formula. Finally—and this consideration has especial value with regard to Saint-George, since he had worked at composition under the guidance of Gossec,—the six quartets of Op. XV, by this last-named musician (1772) are written in the said binary form.

Saint-George's quartets are written in a clear, flowing, ethereal style. More supple, more singing than that of Gossec, his melodies, notably in the *rondos*, well characterizes the sentimental and melancholy mulatto. Here, for example, is the beginning of the graceful and tender *rondo* of the second quartet,

so delicately enwrapped in the cajoling and swaying sonorities of the accompanying instruments:

**Rondeau di Menuetto**

Saint-George was at his best in his *Rondeaux*, and his little vaudevillian airs had given him a genuine reputation: all are instinct with movement, with grace, and are remembered with ease. Here is one, for instance, which has a familiar sound; it might well be a favorite of the *faubourgs*.



We should recall that Haydn, too, chose flexible, lively themes for his *finales*. It was one of the musical pleasures of the epoch to rediscover symmetric divisions, to repeat incidental melodic phrases. "The rounding-out, the return of the phrase in music" declares Grétry, "makes up nearly its whole charm."

Saint-George's *Allegros*, divided into two parts by repetition signs, are built up in classic style upon two themes, with a

dominant cadence. In the two sections we have the development and re-exposition: syncopated rhythms abound, as well as the successions of *mezzo-staccato* notes separated by the rests of which the compositions of the Mannheim school offer so many examples.

2. Our composer's concertos are well enclosed in the usual three compartment frame-work, with a medial *Adagio* or *Largo*; most of them conclude with a *Rondeau*. In the first movements Saint-George confines himself to a considerably varied distribution of the *tutti* and *soli*. Usually, after a well-developed introductory *tutti*, there is an extension of three *soli*, given to the principal violin, after which the *tutti* again intervenes to conclude. The slow movements, whether in the dominant or the sub-dominant key, or in the tonic minor, in most cases have but a single solo. The final *Rondeaux*, on the contrary, present frequent alternations of *tutti* and *soli*: These pieces clearly announce the *Rondeaux* of Viotti's concertos.

In all Saint-George's works the thematic material shows grace, with a touch of Creole languor. The musician likes to repeat his themes, the second time in the lower octave. Very often, especially in the *Rondeaux*, they present repetitions of notes which give them a decided spruceness and elegance. Saint-George employs the major portion of the thematic artifices of the Mannheim school, such as the use of the grace-note or mordant on the second above, and the *Vorhalt* (suspension), which he utilizes to secure an effect of dolorous insistence or solemnity.

At times his themes, as we have already mentioned in connection with his vocal melodies, recall in their inflections and cadences the motives of Gluck. The beginning of the following *Andante* is of this type:



A dashing and brilliant violin player, Saint-George was well aware of the effects to be drawn from motives in larger intervals, which his bow could slash out in *bravura* fashion. Like most musicians of his day, he showed a strong predilection for the multiple chromatic modulations which give the melodic movement a languorous and velvety touch. Here he is frankly an imitator of Gaviniés and Le Duc.

In the thematic development of his concertos he is very fond of introducing repeated inflections toward the minor mode, after some brilliant up-bowings in the circle of fifths.

The slow movements, written in rather an elaborate style, develop plaintive, broken melodies, melodies whose incidental phrases, at the same time dramatic and replete with sobs, were so decidedly the fashion during the last years of the eighteenth century. They are often of the *Romance* type, and end with a *pianissimo* or *morendo*. At times, as in the Second Concerto (Op. III), Saint-George underlines the dreamy character of an *Adagio* by directing that it be played *con sordini*. Finally, in the majority of his *Rondeaux*, he introduced a brilliant variation in major, which he entrusts to the principal violin. We may add that he pays attention to dynamics, as one may easily convince one's self by examining the large number of indications for interpretation which give light or shade to his musical discourse. The only *Symphonie concertante* by Saint-George which has come down to us (in G major) has, according to the rule, two movements, an *Allegro* and a *Rondeau*. It is a species of concerto for 2 principal violins, with accompaniment of orchestra.

3. We know of only 6 Sonatas with violin composed by Saint-George, of which three are posthumous works. The three first are the sonatas for clavecin or piano forte, with violin accompaniment, a genus which was being largely developed in France toward 1775, and to which Méhul, in particular, has contributed some very remarkable examples.

In these sonatas, the violin, far from narrowing itself down to a merely secondary role as an accompanying instrument, collaborates in the thematic exposition and in the development. The modern sonata for violin and piano, without the slightest doubt, springs from compositions of this kind.

Our composer's sonatas are divided into two movements: an initial *Allegro*, followed by a *Minuet* or *Rondeau*. Only the Second Sonata, in A major, adopts the *Andantino* for its second movement, flanked by an *Allegro* in minor, with a *Da Capo* reversion to the *Andantino*: There we once more discover the symmetrical formula of the *Minuet* or *Rondeau*.

The three posthumous sonatas are written for 2 violins, the second violin playing an altogether subordinated part. In the sonatas for clavecin and violin the two instruments are placed on a footing of absolute equality; the violin at times announcing a theme which is taken up again by the clavecin an octave higher; at other times paralleling in thirds the melody played by the clavecinist's right hand.

The *Allegros* are built up on two themes, the second theme in the key of the dominant; and according to the development in

which the two instruments work together, there is a recapitulation of the entire thematic material. The composer writes for the clavecin with distinction, elegance and lightness; in the Minuet of the First Sonata the delicate broken-chord figures of the keyboard instrument, enwrapped by the *pizzicati* of the violin are charmingly effective. Many of the *Allegro* themes flow with gracious ease and have an almost Mozartean flavor.

As a technician of the violin Saint-George may be numbered among the most brilliant of French *virtuosi*. Not only does he audaciously strive to reach the utmost limits of finger manipulation: he attains them; and in addition his bowing is vigorous and exact. He often plays chord passages at a rapid tempo; he dashingly sweeps up a ladder of shrill treble notes to drop brusquely back upon a deep sonorous tone.



Or he carries out his broken-chord effects in the highest positions, in octaves and even in tenths. The suppleness of his bowing permits of his playing variegated passages with the most fastidious perfection, and he handles double-stops like a master. He was at once extremely daring and skillful in passages demanding *brio* and brilliancy, and full of sentiment in the slow movements and *Romances* to which he was especially devoted. Together with Gaviniés, Le Duc, Bertheaume and Paisible, the Chevalier de Saint-George worthily represents the French violin school of the second half of the eighteenth century.

*(Translated by Frederick H. Martens)*